FLEETWOOD WILDCAT

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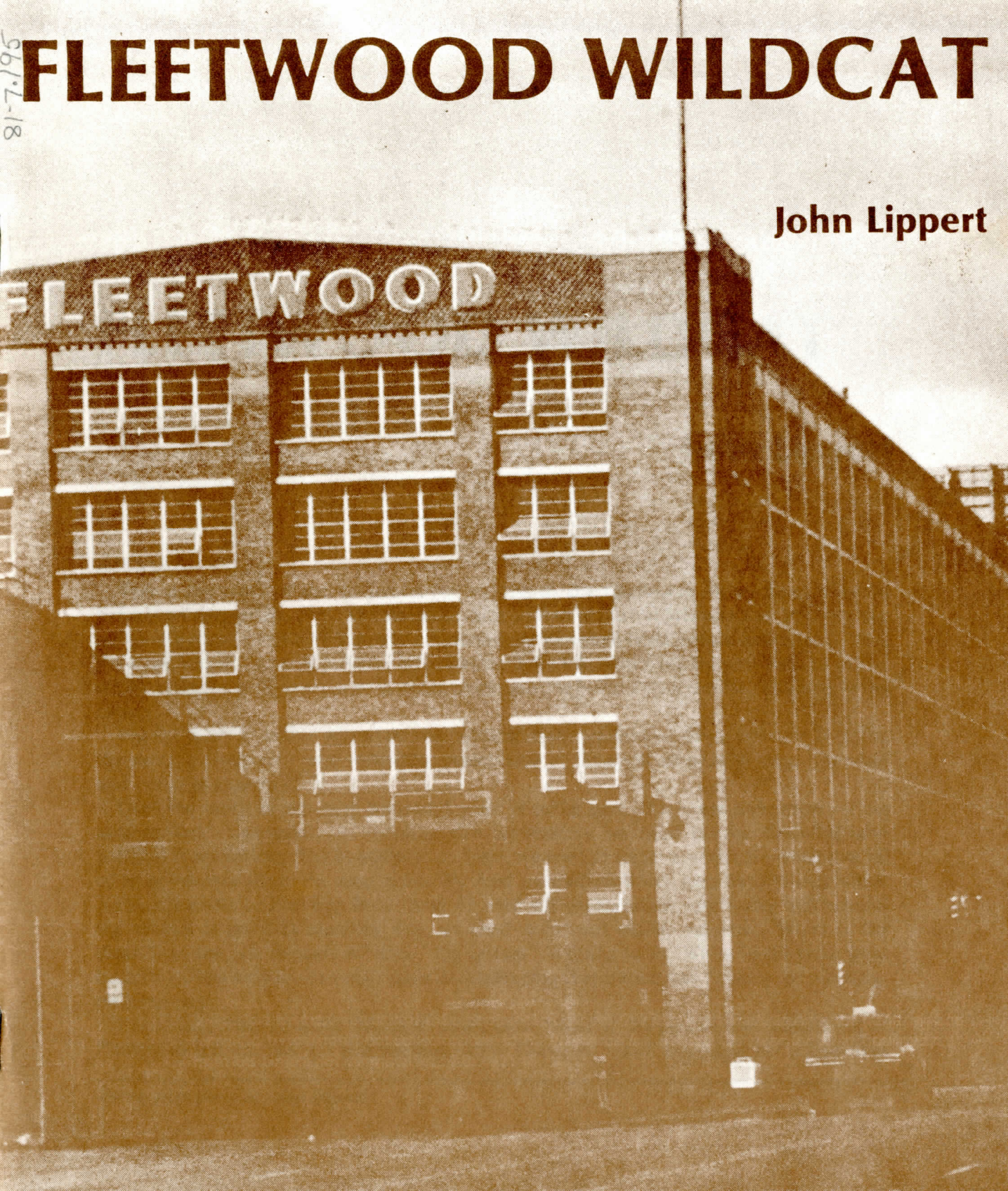

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the wildcat strike we had at the Fleetwood Fisher Body plant in Detroit on August 26, 1976. The story contains a lot of historical information: I present the strike as part of a series of logically connected events which came before and after it. And the story contains a lot of political information: I draw lessons from the strike which will be useful when we at Fleetwood or at other places are confronted with similar situations in the future.

But the story is neither historical nor political in the traditional ways. Because in telling the story, I present my own subjective perceptions of the event along with these historical and political aspects of it.

I tell the story in this way because I want it to be part of a mass movement — the autoworkers' movement. In building this movement, we need precise historical and political formulations. But in addition to these, we need to foster a subjective sense that all of us as workers are in the same boat. We need *comraderie* which goes beyond that which ordinarily exists on the shop floor. And we need self-organization which goes well beyond the unions. More than anything else, we need to tell our stories ourselves. We're in the same boat not just because of what "the system" is doing to us. We're in the same boat because we can only look to each other in challenging that system and fighting for our long-term survival.

I'm trying, then, to make this event come alive. Most of the people who walked out of Fleetwood last summer are still working there. The crises which provoked our action then

Facing page photo by John Lippert.

are still real ones. We're still confronting and collectively discussing the weaknesses in our situation — weaknesses which made the strike only partially successful. A lot of people are asking this question: "How can we do better next time around?"

The first step in telling the story is to set the stage on which it took place. Fleetwood is a major automotive assembly plant. We build bodies for 95% of all Cadillac cars. The bodies are complete when they leave the plant — all the windows, paint, interior and exterior trim are in place. The bodies are then taken by truck about two miles over to the Cadillac assembly plant, where the chassis, front end and engine are added. The line at Fleetwood runs at the speed of 72 cars per hour. Fifty-five hundred people work on the line at Fleetwood. Another nine thousand work over at Cadillac.

Fleetwood and Cadillac are exceptional plants in that they had only minor layoffs during "the energy crisis" and recession. And we've been working extensive overtime for several years now. This is important because as workers it places us in a very powerful position. General Motors wants Cadillac bodies badly, and right now they have to come to us in order to get them. And everybody who works at Fleetwood and Cadillac knows this. The conditions we face are common to auto plants throughout North America. But in the summer of '76, we were in one of the strongest positions to resist them.

The workforce at Fleetwood, like the workforces in auto plants all over the world, has been shaped by mass migrations. The largest group is made up of black people. The next largest group is hillbillys. Most of these people have actually been born in the South, although they've been around Detroit long enough now that their children and even grandchildren are coming into the plant. More recent immigrants come from Mexico, Eastern Europe, Malta, Yemen, and the Middle East. Only the blacks and the most recent immigrants live in Detroit itself. Most of the whites live in a cluster of working-class suburbs to the west and southwest of the city.

The plant is located in the heart of the American industrial empire. From one end of the plant you can look out and see the Ford Rouge complex towering over the Arab ghetto of East Dearborn. To the left of that, you can see an oil refinery, a salt mine, a waste treatment plant, a paper factory and a giant steel mill. From the other end of the plant, you can see the Cadillac Assembly plant rising over the Mexican and hillbilly neighborhood of Southwest Detroit. Behind that you can see the General Motors World Headquarters. And to the right of that you can see downtown Detroit, capped now by the brand new Renaissance Center.

The neighborhoods around Fleetwood and Cadillac are seas of unemployment. Last fall, on the basis of an internal plant rumor at Cadillac, 5,000 people lined up in the darkness and early morning hours, hoping to get an application. Their efforts were in vain, though. There were no jobs, just a shortage of applications on file.

There were two specific and overlapping crises which provoked the walkout last summer. These crises will provide two of the major themes which will guide my description of the event.

The first crisis was on the shop floor itself. The issue was speedup. They had a big changeover at Fleetwood last year. Three of the cars we were building were completely redesigned. And one was eliminated. It was part of an international effort on the part of General Motors to make their cars smaller, lighter, and more integrated (and to make their

workforce smaller as well). All of the jobs at Fleetwood were new. And they were *all* overloaded.

In response to this, people were fighting all over the plant to get work removed from their jobs. The main tactic was to take your job into the hole, that is, to work past your designated work station. Eventually you had to let some of the jobs go by untouched. And eventually you started disrupting jobs farther down the line. A lot of jobs were simply physically impossible to keep up. But a lot of jobs were kept in the hole deliberately.

Most of the foremen have worked on the line themselves, so of course they're aware of all this. It's hard to prove that someone is working in the hole deliberately, but they have a variety of other ways to pressure people. The easiest solution for them is to put new-hires on the job. People are on probation and don't have any power at all until they have their 90 days in. Maybe the foremen will discipline somebody for "bad worksmanship" or for coming back late from a break. A lot of times, the foremen will add extra work onto the job, even if they know it will be removed later. They save a little money in the short run. And basically, it's like over-pricing your used car when you go to sell it: you anticipate the buyer will offer you less than you ask. So then the foremen propose to remove X amount of work from the job. The workers propose to remove $X+Y$ amount of work.

Changeover came at the end of June last year, and a lot of jobs still aren't settled. The tension has frequently exploded into a crisis, and it's never been far below the surface. When the time came to walk out, a lot of people were angry enough to do it.

The second crisis which provoked the walkout was in the union itself. At the time of the walkout, there were a couple thousand grievances outstanding on speedup alone. The grievance procedure had simply ceased to function as a way of resolving speedup disputes in the plant. The company was refusing to seriously bargain with the shop committee. The International Union wasn't giving the shop committee any help. And so the committee, never known as a hotbed of radicalism, found itself isolated and forced to explore a new set of tactics.

There's a third theme which will guide my description of the event. I'll follow closely the actions of a group of leftists who worked in the plant. I'll follow them not just because they were an organic part of the event itself. I'll follow them because what they did raises a lot of general questions about the nature of left activity in this country.

Part of my interest here is in self-understanding. I've been associated with left movements in the past, and I'm constantly reassessing the nature and meaning of this association. I'm not now a member of a party or group or anything. But that's only because I can't find one I like. It'll soon be obvious, though, that my perspective in telling this story is informed at once by my dual identity as a worker and as a leftist.

My association with the left goes back to when I was 17. At that time, my relationship with my parents collapsed and I rebelled against my high school. When I became aware of the Vietnam War I was horrified, and naturally, I was attracted to the anti-war movement. When they tried to draft me I registered as a conscientious objector. It was just an easy way out at the time, but I've since grown proud of the moral statement it represents. That was in 1971, long after the anti-war movement had peaked, but when it had begun to touch other sections of the society besides just students and GI's.

After high school I bummed around for a

while and wound up in college. I didn't have a "career" in mind. It was just something to do. I stayed for two years, during which campus radicalism concerned me more than anything else. But then the school ran out of financial aid and I ran out of money. So I went to work for Fisher Body in Ohio. That was four years ago. I got laid off during "the energy crisis" and at first I was glad. But after several months of desperate unemployment, I was overjoyed to get back into the plants. I've been at Fleetwood now a year and a half. And at the moment I'm 24.

I was never part of that group of leftists who considered themselves "colonizers," to whom working in a plant was a sacrifice. I've always assumed I'd operate within the unskilled labor market. And within that, working for General Motors is "a good job." If I didn't feel that way, I would have quit a long time ago.

Also, I'm not describing my background in the left because I want to address the left as such in this article. I'm just trying to indicate where I'm coming from. I'm seeking an audience in the plants, among people who have been involved in walkouts before and who are trying to assess that experience.

This is, of course, only a limited audience; I have only limited goals for the article. Autoworkers are militant and powerful almost by definition. But it's obvious we can't get very far unless the working class as a whole moves forward. We're confronted with divisions within the working class which run deep. And we're confronted with theoretical and organizational questions which are immense and which can't be addressed solely in terms of our day to day struggle.

But in making this day to day struggle our starting point, at least we'll be starting from somewhere concrete. If there's universality in what we do, we can't hide it. And we must always be concerned with linking up with others within the working class to make both them and ourselves stronger. But initially, our most important concern has to be to remember where our roots are.

I have to specify one more thing before beginning the story: my participation in the walkout itself was guided almost entirely by my instincts as a worker. I had no public political presence, and I wasn't connected with the leftists in the plant. This happened in part because I had returned from layoff only four days before the walkout, and I was thrown into a strange department on a different shift. I didn't know anybody, and it was hard for me to figure out what to do. But to a large extent, I was avoiding a public political role because I wasn't sure what that role should be. My years in the plant and my background in the left hadn't produced any easy answers And so I was concerned mainly with listening and learning as much as I could.

I'm hopeful that my storytelling here can be the last stage in my apprenticeship....

II. WALKOUT

The wildcat started on August 26, 1976. It was a Thursday, payday on second shift. It was a beautiful day in Detroit, hot and sunny. That's one of the reasons I asked Bruno, my foreman, for a pass to go home early. It was very, very hot inside the plant. And I didn't particularly feel like working.

But the other reason I wanted the pass was because I wanted to spent time with Jane, the woman I live with. This was only my fourth day on second shift, and already I was getting bummed out because Jane and I were seeing so little of each other. She works dayshift in a hospital. We had had a fight that Tuesday, and we still hadn't recovered from it. Each day I felt lower and lower. By Thursday I was just plain

down.

I got fucked, though. I got to work only three minutes before the line started. So when I asked Bruno for the pass he just laughed at me. There were seven people ahead of me in line for a pass. I had to stay.

But then the day started, and I began to get immersed in the scene around me. The first thing I did was give this guy Kenny some money for dope. I had been in the department four days, and I had received many offers of dope for sale. Finally I received an offer that made sense. Some guy on the fifth floor was selling blond hash for four dollars a gram.

Then I had a good talk with Jerry, this white biker. He's big and strongly built, wears a Fu Manchu moustache and a belt made out of chain link from a motor cycle. He and I got along good, though. He used to call me "Smiley" because I tried to get along with everybody. He was deep into talking about his family. He said sometimes his kids drove him up a wall, but that he wouldn't trade them for anything. He was in the middle of a divorce. He was demanding custody of his four kids because he thought his wife was too crazy to care for them. He said he had gotten into trouble by becoming "an instant father at nineteen." He said, "When you got people depending on you, it makes it a lot harder to work here. Shit, when I hired in, all I had to pay was $25 a week room and board with my folks and $75 a month car payment. Man, I was earning $200 a week. I used it to go out and buy shit I didn't even need. That was five and a half years ago, and now I can't afford to miss one fucking day of work." After a while, we got onto more cheerful subjects: he was planning to go on a freedom ride that week to protest the helmet laws for bikers.

I was working all through the conversation. My job was to repair and put tape around the quarter glass on the coupes. Quarter glass is the little window on the side of the car that doesn't open. The moulding around the window was all messed up. My job consisted of banging the mouldings back into place with a hammer,filling the various holes with putty, and taping the whole thing up so it would look smooth when the vinyl top was installed. It wasn't a bad job. They were running other cars besides coupes. So it gave me time off the line, time to talk.

Other people in my work group were doing similar jobs. Some people were installing the quarter glass. Some were drilling holes in the mouldings around the glass. Others were shooting the screws to hold the mouldings in. The people right before our group were installing back windows. The people right after us were shooting rivets around a big plastic moulding that went around the back window. This was all basically in preparation for installing the vinyl tops.

We had a lot to talk about that day. The day shift had been sent home at lunchtime, but nobody could figure out why. One rumor was that Cadillac Assembly had had a breakdown. Another was that there were so many repairs that they couldn't run the line any more. Soon we heard that the day shift had been sent home early since they had intended to walk out. Apparently something had happened to the leaders of the union. President Rufus Coleman, a black guy, had been suspended. Shop Chairman Jim Gabbard, a white guy, had been fired. Or so the rumors went. Nobody could tell for sure.

People reacted to all this cautiously at first. But the rumors were pretty dramatic, and after a while people started to get upset. "What the hell kind of union have we got if the company can throw the president out any time they want?" "The union ain't got no backbone any-

way." "If the company can get away with this, pretty soon they'll only pay us two dollars an hour to work here." "How come the fuckin' candy asses on day shift didn't walk out? They said they were goin' to and then they chickened out." Then somebody suggested maybe *we* should walk out. The response here was more sober. "Hell, I'll walk out if everybody else does. But I'm not gonna walk outa here myself."

We spent more than half an hour in this kind of confusion. Apparently, both Gabbard and Coleman had been given time off. They had been in a fight with some Labor Relations people, and Plant Security had thrown them out of the plant. But what provoked the fight, nobody knew.

This discussion was going on within our immediate workgroup. Everybody was upset. Black and white people were both upset: the fact that Coleman was black didn't have immediate relevance. Everybody who was walking by was talking about it, too. And from experience, you knew *everybody* in the plant was discussing it as well. That's true because of the assembly line itself: it confronts everybody with the same issues. Like at that moment everybody was angry about the speedup. Everybody wanted to get out because it was hot.

Then word came that we were walking out at seven. The "word" materialized in the form of Trane, a black reliefman in our department. He had been down on the third floor checking things out. He went around saying, "I just talked to the man. The man said not to call no names, but we goin' at seven." I asked him who "the man" was, and he looked at me like I was crazy. He said, "Man, I just got done tellin' you I ain't gonna call no names." This one guy in our group, Jim, went running around saying, "Man, these guys ain't even gonna wait until we get our checks."

I had a chance to talk to Andy, who had broken me in on my job. Somehow, Andy had managed to stay calm through all this. He said the walkout was being called by the shop committee of the union. He said, "They can't come right out and call for it, though. That would be calling for an illegal work stoppage." He said not to worry, though. He said they'd back us up if we walked out: "They'd never call for something like that and not back it up."

Everybody was walking back and forth and discussing all this. But after a while, people stopped talking much about Gabbard and Coleman, about what had gotten them in trouble, about what a walkout was intended to do and so on. It wasn't that people weren't thinking analytically. Rather, the issues at hand and the reactions were so clear to everybody that people didn't need to discuss them much. After a while people were unanimous: "It's about time somebody stood up to the shit that goes on around here."

The most immediate concern people were expressing was around the attack the company had made on the union. Gabbard and Coleman have little importance as individuals here (they know this better than anyone). People wanted to defend the union itself. People were saying, "The union is only as strong as we are." "If the union can't do the job, then we people in here are going to have to do it ourselves."

But talk about the union served quickly to spark a bigger, more generalized protest. Very soon, the walkout came to be seen as part of the on-going struggle against the speedup. One white guy, Little John, said it this way: "Hell, John. Look at this job I'm doing. They got me workin' like a fuckin' dog in here. I can't work like this all year. Damn right I'm gonna walk out."

Everybody was talking at once. Issues, bitterness, rumors and anxiety were swirling

around me. My own thoughts were as confused as anyone's. I kept looking at my watch and thinking, "Oh my god. In a few minutes I'm going to have to make a *decision* here." Something really dramatic had taken place at Fleetwood that day. People were ready to *go.*

It was this fact, more than anything else, that made me go out. Obviously something was going to happen at seven o'clock. And I'd be damned if I was going to be left on the inside, wishing I had gone along. And you knew that if everybody went the individual risks would be minimal. Most people were thinking this way. Specific events had set the ball rolling. But after a certain point, we were responding to the motion of the ball (and our overall situation) rather than to those events themselves. After a certain point, nobody asked, "Do we *need* a walkout?" People asked, "Are you *going?.*"

At twenty minutes past six I got my break, and the first thing I did was call Jane and tell her I might get out early that day after all. I told her what was happening and she wished me luck. Then I walked around for a while trying to find out just how strong support for the walkout was. People were making the decision to walk out primarily within their own work groups. But there was a lot of circulating back and forth to verify that different groups felt the same way.

A lot of people told me to keep an eye on the Kotan section. That's where they put the vinyl tops on the cars (the word Kotan refers to the material the top is made from). Kotan is probably the most militant section in the plant. This is true mainly because they have a lot of power. In the first place, the job requires a lot of skill. You have to set the top on the car, stretch it, and cut it to precise length. All this takes twenty minutes or more. So they have 35 teams of two people each working in rotation while the line is moving With relief men and extras, there's more than a hundred ten people working on the job. When they take that job in the hole, they have the power to cause a crisis. Jim, this white guy that worked next to me told me, "If you see Kotan walking out, go with them."

I can only remember one guy who said he wasn't walking out: Catfish, a white reliefman in the Kotan section. When I asked him if he was walking out, he said, "I don't know. I walked out with them guys in the body shop back in '69 and I don't know if we got anything for it or not."

A lot of other people were running around, too. At one point I saw Rick, a friend of mine when I had been on dayshift. I yelled out to him, "Hey Rick. What's up?" He was in too much of a hurry to stop, so he held up his hands to form the number 7. That's the time we were set to go out. I yelled back, "Right on, brother," and we both laughed. After that I saw a friend from the body shop. Apparently everyone down there was set to go out. Finally I decided, "Fuck it. I'm as radical as anybody else. I'm going out too."

When seven o'clock came, people started milling around the stairwell. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a bunch of people moving out of the Kotan area, and I knew we were going. I looked over at Andy, who nodded his head and said, "Here we go." I grabbed my lunchbox and started running for the door. I was really scared.

In the rush of things I got separated from Andy and the rest of my work group. And I was immediately aware that a lot of people *weren't* walking out. Only about a third of the department was moving toward the door. When we got to the door, a bunch of people turned back. I heard one guy say, "I'm going to see what happens."

We were coming down off the sixth floor.

When we got to the fifth floor, only a couple people came out. When we got to the fourth floor, nobody at all came out. When the same thing happened on the third floor, I almost choked. Trane, that black reliefman in our department, ran back downstairs and started yelling, "Come on everybody. Come on you motherfuckers. Let's *go.*" I kept going, though, so I never saw if he had much effect. There's a hallway that runs the whole length of the plant on the first floor. When we got to that, I thought, "Well good, we'll see a mass movement down here now." But when I looked down the hallway, it was empty.

A lot of people turned back then, but some people kept going. I wasn't sure what to do. Then I saw the look on Brian's face. Brian was a guy that worked right next to me on the line. His face said, "Goddamn right I'm not gonna turn back."

The guards didn't make any attempt to stop us as we ran out the gate. You could hear their walkie-talkies crackling: "Going out at Gate 4. Situation normal at Gate 7." There were only about 75 people at my gate then. The momentum of the walkout carried us past the gate, but then it started to splinter away. Groups of people moved toward the parking lot. Some people crossed the street. Some headed for the bar. The thing that freaked me out was that Andy and the people in my group had disappeared. I attached myself to the group heading for the bar. But basically, when I hit the street, I was *alone.*

III. ON THE STREET

When I got around the building, I could see some people at the other end. But it was a pretty small crowd. A lot of people were lined up at the windows, shouting at us. I don't remember what they were saying. We shouted back, "Walk out. Walk out. Come on you motherfuckers." Just as I was crossing the street, somebody dropped a lunch out of a sixth floor window. It smashed into the sidewalk just inches away from somebody walking in back of me.

When I reached the bar my hands were shaking, and I drank some scotch to try and calm down. There were only a couple of people in the bar, and they were in the same shape I was. A couple of them were talking about "the candyass motherfuckers" that start to walk out and then turn back. I had no idea what was going on. I just wanted my hands to stop shaking.

After a few minutes a crowd began to form outside the bar. People were pulling their cars up and parking. Plus people were finally coming around from the body shop gate on the other side of the plant.

The police arrived on the scene within minutes. They said there wouldn't be any problem as long as we didn't block traffic. That presented us with a problem, since the crowd was beginning to spill out into the street. Then somebody announced that the gas station next to the bar would let us stand on their property. The station was owned by some Arabs who had a lot of connections with Arabs inside the plant.

There was still some hope that the rest of the people would walk out. People lined up and chanted, "Walk out. Walk out." A few tried to lead the chants. Sometimes they were successful and sometimes they weren't. One of the people trying to lead the chants was this guy named Dave Hart, who I recognized from the Kotan area. After listening to the leaders, Brian, who had inspired me not to turn back, recoiled in disgust. He said, "I don't want any part of them Commie motherfuckers."

The main concern was to find out if we had actually shut the place down or not. The crowd outside the bar had grown to about 200 by then.

But there was no way of knowing how many had actually walked out. We spent a lot of time speculating about this. After a while, people began to agree on the number 600. We could see open trunk lids on all the cars up on the fourth floor. We saw them start to move at about twenty minutes past seven. The line ran for about two minutes, then it stopped. It didn't run again for the rest of the night. We had shut the fucker *down.*

People started forming into groups around the bar. From what I could tell, the groups duplicated the groups people work in every day. I finally saw Andy, Kenny, Jim, Hook and the rest of the people in my work group. My relief was immense. It wasn't until then that my hands stopped shaking. The first thing I did was jump in the car and go to the beer store. Me and Kenny brought back a bunch of beer and passed it around to everybody.

We spent a long time talking about exactly who did and who didn't walk out. "Where's Rich?" "He started to walk out but he musta turned back." "Where's Randy, that cock-sucker?" "I thought I saw Mel out here." "I did, too. He musta split already." One guy from our group, Danny, didn't walk out, but he came to the window on the second floor right across from us to explain why: "I got a month (suspension) on paper, man. I can't do shit." Apparently he had just returned to work from being in jail. If he had walked out he would have been gone for sure. Everybody sympathized with him.

Being with these people and reconstructing our group was important for me. Already I had begun worrying about reprisals when we got back. When I asked Andy about it, he said, "Don't worry. They won't do nuthin'." I made a decision at that point that I wouldn't make any decisions about the wildcat unless those people were with me. I didn't even know the names of these people when I walked out. And already I felt close to them.

I began to feel this respect for everyone on the crowd, not just the people in my work-group. I walked around trying to find out who these people were. I saw Rick and Willie, two guys I had known on dayshift. It made me happy to see them. It confirmed the trust I already had in them. And it validated my decision to walk out. I talked with both of them, and it was clear that they felt the same way bout me.

But then I realized that Willie and Rick didn't even talk to each other in the plant (Willie's black and Rick's white and this is *definitely* part of their dislike for each other.) It struck me that an incredible variety of people had walked out: as many white as black, as many women as men (I'd say proportionately many more women than men came out), as many old as young, as many married as single, as many with families as without. The only group that wasn't clearly represented out there was skilled trades, but maybe I just wasn't able to recognize those people.

It soon became apparent that specific areas of the plant had participated in the walkout more than others. A lot of people were talking about this. But nobody was sure why this was so.

Certain areas, like Kotan, had a long tradition of militancy and you could just about assume that a lot of them would walk out. There were other sections like that around the plant. But basically, people felt like certain sections of the plant weren't out there because the union had fucked up and not told them. People were pretty angry about that. One guy was saying, "If you want a walkout you either call it or you don't. But you don't go half way. That just gets everybody in trouble."

We had all walked out with the idea that

everybody was coming with us. But in the end only five or six hundred out of three thousand had walked out. Suddenly, we were not just a minority, we were the *radical* minority. We had put our asses on the line. I might have walked out anyway if I had known this would happen. But it still came as sort of a shock.

My first reaction to this was to hope that once we got back there wouldn't be too great a division between those who walked out and those who hadn't. That would make for a big mess when we tried to pick up the struggle on the inside. But basically I felt like, as unfortunate as these divisions might be, I was glad as hell to be on the outside of the plant then and not on the inside.

The union might have had enough credibility in the plant to *call* the walkout. But it's just not responsible for the fact that *some of us didn't turn back,* even when it was obvious that a lot of people weren't coming with us. By the time we reached the sidewalk, it was *us* who shut the plant down, not the union or anybody else. If the union survives the attack the company is making on it, it's because *we* have chosen to act in its defense.

Why didn't we turn back? The reasons are complex. For most of us, "the system" is not something we belong to. It's something that exists in opposition to us. Our work is not something given willingly, but only as something necessary for survival. We compromise with "the system" always. But on that particular day, we had a little space within which to maneuver. We could postpone the compromise if we choose to. A lot of us grabbed that space. And once we had it in our hands we weren't about to let it go.

It's taken me a long time to be able to articulate what happened on the sidewalk that day. These are my recollections of a collective discussion that took place among 200 people for about two hours. My state of mind then was nearly euphoric. The same was true of many people in the crowd. It was as though we had unlocked something inside ourselves by what we had done.

Ordinarily, our perceptions of Fisher Body are ambiguous. There's bitterness, pain, some positive feelings (in relation to the other workers), lots of resignation, and a widely-held view that you have to hustle just to survive in that place. Most of the time, that hustle, that struggle, goes on in isolation. It's not clear what you've won on any given day. And no matter what you win, you always have to come back the next day to struggle all over again.

Perceptions of self-activity, of how we act as a group to better ourselves, are there on a day to day basis. But they're clouded over. They exist alongside many ambiguous and contradictory forces. But on the day of the walkout, if only for a moment, things were clearer. We were on the offensive. Our self-activity became central.

We had some time to kill on the sidewalk that day. We used the time to regroup our forces, to assess what moves came next and so on. But after a while, we began to *celebrate.* We began to solidify a *community* we had created through our walkout. I found the precision and clarity with which people analyzed the situation electrifying. I only wish I could remember more specific comments. I remember saying over and over to myself, "I wish I had a tape recorder."

One comment I do remember. A bunch of us were discussing the people who hadn't walked out. This one guy, Mike, was saying, "Nobody forces you to stay inside the plant. You can walk out any goddamn time you get ready. If they try to make you stay, you sue them for kidnapping. That's why you have to walk out once in a while. Just so the company will treat you like men and not like dogs."

After a while I called Jane. I told her she could come down there if she wanted, that we were having a big party. It was true. People were scattered all over, drinking, talking, moving back and forth from group to group. It was late summer by then, so it stayed warm long after the sun went down. At long last, people were beginning to unwind from the strain we were all under.

Ever since we had been on the sidewalk, cars had been stopping along Fort St. to ask us what happened. A lot of cars honked their horns in support. Some TV cameras came. We put on a little show for them, and we all agreed we've have to be back home in time to watch the news.

Not long after that, people started talking about going over to the union hall for a meeting. Apparently, while most people were partying down in the parking lot, some people were trying to figure out what to *do*. I didn't know who was pulling the meeting together, but it didn't matter. Most of the crowd was going over. And it did seem like we had some business to attend to.

IV. GATHERING AT THE UNION HALL

When we arrived at the union hall, my first reaction was surprise. The scene there was completely different from the one we left behind on the sidewalk. Back there, the atmosphere was almost *serene*. At the union hall it was *chaotic*. Everybody was still standing in small groups, but the groups were jammed into an incredibly small space. The noise was horrendous; you had to shout to talk to the person next to you. Everybody was asking everybody else what was going on. But nobody seemed to know. I saw some people standing in the financial secretary's office. So I squeezed my way in to join them.

It was pretty exciting to be in that office. It was like doing something illegal, like kids making off with the cookie jar. I found out later it actually was illegal: we had no authorization to be in the building. Apparently some people had convinced the custodians to let them in to use the phones, and instead, the people opened the place up to everybody else. I didn't know what the custodians were thinking by this time. But luckily, nobody called the police.

After a while, we moved into the meeting hall. It was pretty small; we had difficulty fitting 200 people in there. At first I thought nearly everybody had come over from the sidewalk. But the crowd was smaller, blacker, and younger than the crowd on the sidewalk. There still seemed to be a wide range of plant seniority, though. It was clear that most of the people hadn't been involved in a meeting like that before.

The first person to talk was Dave Hart. He wasn't actually talking. He was shouting, trying to get the attention of the crowd. He started by saying, "We need a little order here, a little discipline. We've got to show them that the rank and file can run a good, democratic meeting. If it's all right, I'll chair the meeting. I'm just doing it because nobody else has stepped forward. So if nobody has any objections, I'll just go ahead." He paused for a minute, and then said, "OK, I'll go ahead. I think the first thing we should do is elect a committee that will be our leadership during the strike. If nobody has any objections, I'll start the nominations off by nominating Alice. Everybody knows Alice, from the third floor. I nominate Alice."

I didn't know this at the time, since I was new on second shift, but Hart was well-known as a radical in the plant. He was involved in passing out a small shop bulletin called the *Fleetwood Reporter*. He led a semi-successful boycott of

the plant's coffee wagons when they raised their prices. He was always bugging the company about safety regulations in the plant: I heard once he called in Federal Inspectors to check on the noise levels. And he was always bugging the union: trying to get them to open up, to be more democratic, to be more responsive to the needs of the workers. Hart might have tried to explain this activity in terms of being "a concerned rank and filer." But it was obvious he was into it more than most people. So he was generally perceived in the plant to have some communist or left-wing connections. And just by stepping forward, he made these connections a central part of the agenda of the meeting.

But it was on the basis of a lot of hard work that Hart was taking the lead at that moment. He had proven himself in shop floor struggles. He had demonstrated his willingness to fight for his ideals — a lot of people respected this even if they didn't exactly agree with what he believed in. And Hart had been able to withstand vicious company counterattacks. They had been trying to get him for years. At the time of the walkout, in fact, he was down in Labor Relations. They had busted him for playing cards, which is technically illegal, but which goes on day in and day out anyway.

You have to be careful in evaluating the kind of threat people like Hart pose to the company and the union. It's a real threat. But basically the only thing Hart and people like him do is to articulate and pursue more militantly the struggle which goes on day in and day out in the plant anyway. But most workers aren't too outspoken about what they do. And they're generally into avoiding direct confrontation. When somebody like Hart goes around in public saying that the struggle of workers should not only be pursued more strongly, but also that it expresses some positive social values, the union and the company go berserk! They want to cut out that kind of talk right from the start. Also, Hart and people like him are just the latest generation of labor radicals who have been in the plants right from the beginning. And the company (and the union which was created by them) have been trying to stamp them out for years.

But in saying all this, I have to point out that anti-communism is strong in the plants as well. And there's some good reasons for this. Everybody has experience with radicals who came on real strong and then sold out. But also, with the massive repression this country saw during the McCarthy era, the left-wing community today has only shallow roots inside the industrial working class. When left wingers step forward, people don't understand their motives and so don't trust them. This is compounded by the fact that most left-wingers today have been to college. In the experience of most people in the plants, colleges train people (e.g., teachers, social workers, engineers) to do one thing: to keep the workers in line. The best that can be said about someone who went to college is that they'll probably be here today and be gone tomorrow.

I was watching Brian as I thought of this. His eyes were sparkling as Hart spoke. Brian was one of the strongest shop floor militants I had met in the department; he was the one who inspired me not to turn back. And yet he had recoiled in disgust when Hart had tried to lead the chants. "I don't want any part of that Commie motherfucker," he said. I knew I didn't agree with Brian's ideas about radicals. But I was worried that his strength and militancy wouldn't get expressed in a meeting dominated as this one was by radicals.

For some reason, the meeting wasn't going well. Something started to go wrong with the committee selection almost as soon as it began.

When it came time for the body shop to pick a representative, everybody yelled, "Old Mike, Old Mike." Mike turned out to be this big old guy with gray hair, boots, and coveralls covered with dirt from the body shop. He came to the front of the room and started yelling, "I've been working at Fleetwood since before we had a union. I was in the sitdown strike we had here to get the union in. That's why I know you can't do anything here without your *officially elected union representatives.* They've been called on the phone. They'll be here shortly. Please. Please. We must wait till they get here before going any further."

People were taken aback by what Mike said. Some began to boo and hiss as he spoke. Somebody yelled, "We ain't got no union representatives, Mike. They all got fired. That's why we're out here in the first place." After Mike realized he wasn't getting anywhere, he sat down in disgust. People were surprised, but they were glad Mike had given up. He didn't belong to any committee talking like that.

After a minute, Hart continued with the committee selection. He would call out, "Second floor." Then there would be a little demonstration: "Here we are. Right on, second floor. Second floor is the baddest floor in Fleetwood." Then Hart would ask, "Who do you nominate?" The reply: "You do it, Bill." "No, Rick, you do it." Then Rick would say, "OK, I'll do it." Hart: "All in favor?" Then, another demonstration: "Yeah, Rick. You're our man, Rick. Give 'em hell, Rick." And around the plant we went. Each floor, the body shop and the paint shop all had representatives.

When it came time for the sixth floor to choose, a young black woman raised her hand and was approved. I didn't know her and I noticed a lot of people from the floor who didn't participate in her selection. That made me think she really didn't represent too many people from the floor. It was strange, because she took her place in the front next to Alice, a woman who clearly did have the respect of a lot of people.

After everybody was selected, Hart called them to the front for a meeting. They huddled in the corner for a minute, and the larger meeting began to break down into very loud, individual discussions. There were two or three people trying to get the attention of the group at once. Hart kept trying to alternate between the larger meeting and the smaller meeting in front. Probably 60 to 70% of the people were sitting in silence, watching the scene unfold.

Under this kind of pressure, it wasn't long before the committee fell apart entirely. Nobody was waiting for them to get their shit together. The committee members themselves were paying more attention to the larger meeting than to the small meeting they were supposed to be having in the front.

It's unfortunate this happened, because the committee idea did make a lot of sense. We did have some collective tasks to deal with, and we did need a way of assigning responsibility. But the committee never made it, I think, because we never had a chance to *think* about it. People were chosen on the basis of popularity and respect, but not in relation to specific *political* expectations the group would have of them. Of course, it's easier to see these things in retrospect. At the time I was as bewildered and as silent as anyone else.

Hart had made an attempt at a democratic process, but it had come on a technical, not a political level. Democracy is a form of self-expression. People have to say what's on their minds: all people, even if the views are in conflict. The structure and the decisions flow from there. At the very least, when the process is over, people have to *feel* like they were involved.

People didn't feel involved in the committee structure and as a result, couldn't and didn't support it. And the collapse left us ill-equipped to develop any kind of collective process for the duration of the walkout. Many tasks which ideally would have been collective became Hart's more by default than by consensus.

To a certain extent, Hart was responsible for this collapse. He introduced an agenda for the meeting that was a couple steps removed from where the workers were at just then. It's hard for me to criticize him for this, because even to introduce that agenda took courage and clarity of thought which under the circumstances was amazing. Probably he acted as he did because he had in mind an agenda for such a meeting long before it actually occurred. In fact, all his years of radical activity had prepared him for just such an occasion.

But I think there's a deeper reason for the collapse of the committee. I think all of us (including Hart) were in the process of discovering that there wasn't really much we could do in that situation. Once we left the plant, we left behind all the traditional ways of exerting pressure on the company. All we could really do then was decide when to go back. To do any more would have required prior preparation and organization: deeper unity in the plant, support in other plants, support in the community and so on. And for that kind of organization, we had right up until that moment been relying on the union. When the union collapsed we were left holding the bag and we were ill-equipped to cope with it. The odds were totally stacked against us at that point.

And so after the committee fell apart, the meeting never really recovered its momentum. We were left groping. Everyone was trying hard to define the issues, though. I remember this one black woman who spoke. She was excited; it was probably the largest group she had addressed in her whole life. Her main point was that she hadn't walked out only for Gabbard and Coleman, but also because "my job has too damn much work on it. *That's* the issue for me." She paused for a moment as she said this. It was as though she were hoping her excitement would turn the tide of the meeting. When the reaction of the crowd was ambiguous, she too lost the track, rambled, and then sat down, frustrated. This happened to a lot of people.

This one black guy suggested that we return the next day to hold out the day shift. He said, "We'll be in a whole lot of trouble if them people go to work tomorrow." He said they'd probably support us, but "they can't if they don't *know* about it." Hart said, "We'll have a leaflet out there tomorrow when the day shift comes in" — it wasn't clear who he meant by "we."

Somebody else, a hillbilly, suggested that we go back to the plant at lunchtime on the night-shift. He said that if people came out of the plant for lunch "you kin bet your ass they won't be a-goin' back in there tonight." I agreed with his point, but I wasn't sure just how far he was prepared to go to keep people out.

After a while, this other communist guy got up. You could tell he was a communist because he always talked about the "capitalist class" as though he thought it was important in and of itself to use those words. Hart didn't want to call on him: you could tell the two of them had fights with each other in the past.

What the guy said wasn't bad, though. He said we needed a set of demands. He held his hands above his head as he counted off four of them: 1) reduce the work on overloaded jobs, 2) call all laid off brothers and sisters back from layoff, 3) no reprisals against any brother or sister who walked out, and 4) reinstate Gabbard and Coleman. He said, "We have to

be back here tomorrow morning prepared to fight for those demands."

I was impressed. I had heard it all before. But the guy had a way of putting it all together that gave it some coherence. And we needed coherence more than anything else at that moment.

But through all of this, a consensus began to emerge. It was important to be back the next day to hold out the dayshift. There was vague support for the four demands. And Hart and some other people would put out a leaflet.

Nobody spoke out against the leaflet. People liked the idea. They would have spoken up if they hadn't liked it. But people felt uninvolved in the leaflet project in the same way that they had felt uninvolved in the committee thing. Hart referred to it this way: "We'll be out there tomorrow with a leaflet and people should take some to hand out." But it was obvious the leaflet would go through if you volunteered or not. So support of the leaflet was there, but it was shallow. I think now that Hart left the meeting thinking he had a stronger consensus than what he had.

V. THE EVENING CONCLUDES

When we got back to the plant, there were people gathering again at the gas station. But the crowd was much smaller than before. A couple union people were out talking. Of course they wanted us to go back. It turned out that people were actually gettting ready for violence. The police were getting ready, too; they were out in greater numbers than before.

Everybody was concerned about people coming out for lunch and then re-entering the plant. I kept asking people if there would be trouble, and people said, "I don't know. Everybody's pretty hot. There could be some cars rolled over and that kind of shit."

People used the word riot — a classic Detroit expression — to describe what could happen. After a while, the Fleetwood Inn closed up. They were afraid of trouble inside the bar. Plus they probably figured they had already made their money for the night. I was getting worried, but I wanted to support what people did....

Luckily, the company avoided the crisis by sending everyone home at lunchtime. The line hadn't run since seven o'clock, and people had been just laying around since then. They were pretty worried when they came out. They had been hearing rumors about how we were beating up cops and burning cars in the parking lots.

Later that night, I watched the news. I saw myself and some of my friends. It was really neat. I was pounding on the chair and hollering, "Right on. Fuck them motherfuckers." They said it wasn't clear what had provoked the walkout. They said Cadillac assembly had been shut down at lunchtime. That was pretty neat: it meant about fifteen thousand people were out of work because of the strike. It gave you a little sense of power. The other thing they said on the news was that at 8:30, an hour and a half after we walked out, the International Union issued a statement saying the strike was illegal and ordering us back to work. My reaction to that was, "Shit, I knew it was illegal before I even walked out."

VI. FRIDAY MORNING

I was back at the plant at about ten after five. Everybody had agreed that it was important to hold out the dayshift. But I had no idea what it would take to accomplish this. The first thing I did was hook up with people in my work group. It made me happy to see them. I was still going by my decision not to make a move without consulting them first.

A crowd was starting to gather at the front gate. Some people had returned that morning

and some hadn't. I'd say about 150 out of the 600 who walked out did return. Most of the nightshift people were across the street in the gas station. Hart and some of his friends were out with the leaflet and bullhorns. Hart was joined at this point by Lori Saunders, a leftist woman who worked in the plant, also. I don't remember what the leaflet said; basically it listed the four demands we came up with at the meeting the night before. There was a second leaflet; apparently it had been run off by some people who had been at that same meeting. A lot of people had brought signs back down. Some people were chanting.

I went down to the back gate with some of the people in my work group. There were about a thousand people milling around the gate. A lot of people read the leaflets. And everybody talked to people they knew from the nightshift. There was no physical attempt to keep people from going in the gate. Perhaps five hundred people did. But when six o'clock came, it was not nearly enough to run the line. We had achieved another victory. The crowd remained for an hour or so. Then it began to disperse.

One thing that struck me during this was that people were at every point during the strike prepared for violence. That morning, this young, white hippie guy kept yelling at people to stay out. He was obviously high on some kind of drug. He kept running out and pounding cars as people drove into the parking lot. One time he did that, and the driver of the car got mad. The driver swerved the car sharply to the right, hit the fence, got out, and started running back to the hippie. I thought, "Oh my god, here we *go.*" You could feel a sense of panic surge through the crowd as everyone turned round to watch. Evidently the guy in the car knew the hippie, or else they settled their dispute quickly. In a few minutes they were shaking hands and the guy got back in his car and drove away. Everybody relaxed immediately. But people were saying, "Man that was a close call," and "Shit, I thought we were going to have a riot out here today."

I still hadn't learned what had happened to get Gabbard and Coleman in trouble. One rumor I heard was that the trouble started when the company transferred this guy with twenty years seniority into the body shop as punishment for calling a committeman. I saw this one union guy, and he told me a different story. He said the trouble started on the fifth floor on the afternoon shift when some foreman tried to get people to sweep the floor when the line was down. Of course, people refused. When the union guy came down, he supported the workers, and he got busted for "interfering with the rights of management." Both the union guy and the workers were given time off. When the dispute got down to labor relations it exploded. A shoving match ensued between Gabbard and the Director of Labor Relations, a man called Grogan. Coleman was on the sidelines of this, swearing at Grogan. So Grogan got Plant Security to throw both Gabbard and Coleman out of the plant.

I was absolutely amazed by what the union guy was telling me. I had shivers running up and down my spine as I thought about it. I couldn't believe that the union, and the grievance procedure that lies at the core of it, had been dealt such a violent, staggering blow.

People don't have to work when the line goes down. That's the most basic right the workers have in that place: it's like their revenge for being so subjected to the line in the first place. And Shop Chairmen and Labor Relations people aren't supposed to shove each other. They're supposed to talk. They're supposed to be "responsible" and "businesslike."

If this is what it took to provoke that strike, I was just amazed. The normal social relation-

ships which govern that place were totally disrupted. And it was still too early to tell what they would look like by the time the strike was over....

But by this time, the crowd at the back gate was dispersing, so I went around to the front. The first thing I saw was that the company was out with videotape cameras, filming the crowd. It was really wierd. I couldn't figure out if they were collecting information or if they were trying to intimidate us. People were saying, "Big Brother is watching you."

The next thing I saw was President Coleman. He was standing in the front door of the plant, talking through a bullhorn about how we should go back to work. People were saying he had to do that or else he'd be fired. But it was still pretty offensive, since we had walked out in part to support him. It also seemed like if he was merely complying with the law he could do it in a way that would indicate he had opinions of his own. People were pretty upset. They'd drown him out with boos every time he spoke.

I didn't know this at the time, but a meeting took place that morning between Coleman, Hart and his friends, and some other people from the plant. I don't know exactly what had happened, but apparently people got up one after another to denounce Coleman and he didn't say much of anything. People were trying to get him to call a special membership meeting that Sunday to discuss the whole thing, but he refused. So people started talking about calling their own meeting on Sunday.

Hart and some other people spent part of the day trying to harass some upper level union people. They went out to the Regional Office on Telegraph Road. Nobody out there would talk to them. Then they went downtown to Solidarity House, the Headquarters of the International Union. They talked to some assistant to the assistant down there. But he said everything had to come to him through the Regional Office.

Apparently all the union people from the plant were summoned to a meeting that day at the Regional Office. The Regional and the International officers were out in force. They lectured the local people about how it was the union's responsibility to get people back to work, about how this had to be accomplished at any cost, how the local could wind up in receivership and so on. At some point during the day, perhaps at this meeting, they changed their story about what had happened. They said Gabbard had taken an early vacation. And they said Coleman had "merely" been given a paper suspension (that is, it would just be put on his record to be used against him later).

At one point during the morning, a bunch of workers from the dayshift lined up outside the front gate to get their paychecks. But then the company announced they wouldn't pay anybody that day as sort of a punitive thing. And people started screaming. One guy put his foot through the window of the front door. A friend of mine who was there described it to me as a "riot." Police (including some in a helicopter) swarmed onto the scene. Tempers in the crowd went even higher. And then the company agreed to pay everyone.

I watched TV at lunchtime. Fleetwood had purchased a bunch of short time slots. The announcer would say, "Attention. Attention. The management of Fleetwood Fisher Body advises all workers that the strike is illegal. All workers should report to work at the usual time."

After that, the news came on. They were talking a much harder line against the workers and the union. They kept saying "an unfounded rumor" had sparked the walkout. They said President Coleman hadn't been suspended. He had merely received a paper suspension.

They said it was this misunderstanding that sparked the walkout. I pounded on the chair and said, "Fuck you, goddamit. I know what I'm on strike for." I couldn't believe it. They had come right out and called the workers stupid. Then they said the International Union had issued another statement ordering us back, but that "the workers obviously aren't listening to their union, and company officials aren't sure when production will resume." That was a low blow there. The company was really trying to make the union look bad.

VII. FRIDAY AFTERNOON

Jane came down to the plant with me that afternoon. I wasn't really planning on going to work. And I wanted to share some of this experience with her. We went to the back gate, because that's where Marty and some other friends had said they'd be. Again, I was intent on hooking up with the people in my work group. There were a couple hundred people hanging around the gate. But I didn't know any of them. And I didn't see anyone from my work group.

As five o'clock approached, when the shift was supposed to start, this got to be more and more of a bummer. I suddenly found myself under a lot of pressure. I had to decide whether or not to go to work. It was an important decision, and I had anticipated making it as part of a group. Now suddenly the group was gone. And I had to decide alone. The pressure became greater and greater as five o'clock approached. I found myself *agonizing* over what to do.

I saw Bruno, my foreman, across the street. He was leering out from behind the fence, making note of who was around. I was sure he saw me, and that didn't make me feel any better.

At a quarter to five, most of the people who had been standing around the gate went in. It was demoralizing as first one group then another broke ranks and then went in. I felt confused and defeated. I felt like I had no choice but to go in. Jane agreed. But I waited until the last possible moment.

Just then Kenny came up. He worked right next to me on the line, and he was one of the more together people in the work group. He said he wasn't going in. He said it in a calculated sort of way. He had just been busted for bad attendance before the walkout, and figured with that on his record he'd get about three days off for the walkout. But that seemed like a reasonable chance to take. He also said that we were already in trouble, and that whether or not we went in that afternoon didn't make a lot of difference. When I heard Kenny talking like that I said, "Fuck it. I'm not going in either." I figured at the very least we'd suffer the consequences together.

But then I realized the crowd out there was tiny compared to the one that had been there that morning. Suddenly I realized almost no one had shown up for work that day! I jumped on a car to check, and sure enough, the parking lot was only about a third full. There was no way in the world they could run the plant that day. I started to get excited then. We had achieved another victory.

And then Jane and I went to the front gate, and there were about 500 people up there. I couldn't believe it. We had been at the wrong gate! I walked around a bit, and immediately I found the rest of the people from my work group. Of course they had all stayed out, and my decision to stay out was completely validated. It was a joyous reunion. People said, "Where the fuck were you?" I told them how I had been agonizing in the back about what to do and they all laughed. I said, "If I was inside right now I'd probably start crying." One guy

said, "John, you should have known to come around to the bar looking for us. You should have known we're a beer lovin' kind of people."

President Coleman was out there with a bullhorn again. He was saying he hadn't been suspended, that he had just received a paper suspension. People were pretty disgusted. They would drown him out with boos when he talked.

After a while, Jane and I went down to the Fleetwood Inn. It was packed. Once again, we had shut it down. Plus we had a Friday night off in the summertime. Things were looking pretty good. We'd have to account for what we had done. But we'd worry about that on Monday.

After a while, Hart, Saunders, and some of their friends came in. Hart was saying he had just been jumped by a union guy named Wayne Powell. Powell was apparently some kind of arch-conservative who hated Hart's guts. From what I could tell, Powell had jumped Hart from behind, knocked him down, and ripped the leaflets from his hand.

A lot of people were talking about a meeting on Sunday. There was a rumor going around that we'd try to hold the plant out again on Monday and then go back on Tuesday. I was pretty skeptical. It wasn't clear what we could accomplish if we stayed out another day. And it seemed like we'd be stretching the momentum of the walkout pretty thin.

My skepticism was confirmed when I located people in my work group. Brian, Hook, Mike and the rest were in the back of the bar playing pinball. After a while, we talked a little strategy. The assumption was that we'd return to work on Monday. We were beginning to discuss how the walkout would affect the ongoing struggle on the shop floor.

We started by talking about the meeting on Sunday. Some guys were going and some guys said they weren't. My impression was the most people wouldn't go. Then Hook said, "I know just what Bruno's gonna say when we get back. He's gonna say, 'OK, if you guys drop all the '78's (speedup grievances), I'll drop all the penalties for the walkout.' When he says that, I'm gonna say 'no fuckin' way, motherfucker. If you want to take me downstairs let's go. I could use a couple days off anyway.' " Then Hook started talking about a way to fuck Bruno when we got back in. He said, "Here's what we should all do. When he takes us downstairs, we'll tell them *Bruno* was the one who told us about the walkout. We'll say, 'We were all sitting at the picnic table on break. Bruno came up and said he heard there'd be a walkout at seven. He said he was only talking off the record, but that he'd advise against walking out.' We'll tell them that's the only way we knew about the walkout! Bruno will be in so much hot water even *he* won't be able to talk his way out of it."

Hook, the undisputed leader of our work group, had done it again. He had set the stage for Monday with a stroke of genius. We couldn't stop laughing as we walked out of the bar.

VIII. MEETING ON SUNDAY

For me, nothing much happened in relation to the walkout on Friday night or Saturday. When it came time to go to the meeting on Sunday, I didn't feel particularly enthusiastic about going. But I knew it was important to be there.

When I got to the union hall, it was locked, and a small crowd was gathering in a vacant lot across the street. The lot was covered with gravel, and next to it stood a big, old and apparently abandoned warehouse. As I came across the street, Hart and some other people

were setting up loudspeakers. They were running the sound through a small, portable phonograph. After a while, they got someone to pull a pickup truck around to the front. People were to stand in the bed of the truck as they spoke.

There were about two hundred people. The crowd seemed older and whiter than the crowd that had been at the union hall that first night. I didn't recognize too many people, so I had the impression that a lot of people at the meeting Sunday hadn't participated in the original walkout. I talked to a couple people who hadn't walked out, but who came to "see what was going to happen."

None of the people in my work group were there. That was a drag. And it occurred to me that the crowd was standing in groups of two's and three's instead of eight's and ten's as on the first night. That made me think very few work groups were reconstructed at the meeting. This made me apprehensive because it was on that level that most of the important decisions were being made about the walkout. I thought it would be hard for the meeting to make decisions which represented a *workers* point of view, even though there were a lot of individual workers present.

Hart began the meeting by saying that he'd like to be the chairperson, but that if anybody objected he'd step down. When nobody did object, he continued. He talked a lot about the irony of meeting in a vacant lot. He kept pointing over the the union hall and saying, "There it is. We bought it. We paid for it. And now we can't even use it." He said union officials at all three levels had been notified about the meeting, but none had come. He said we'd have to carry the burden of the walkout alone. Again he said it was important to show the union that the rank and file could run a good, democratic meeting.

Hart then listed what had happened so far. He stressed that Gabbard and Coleman had indeed been suspended. He said they put out the story about vacations and paper suspensions only after they had been pressured from higher up in the union. He also stressed that the shop committee had definitely called the walkout: he said they shouldn't be allowed to avoid responsibility for that. He criticized the union people for being at the gate on Friday trying to get us back. And he criticized President Coleman specifically for refusing to call a special meeting to discuss the whole thing.

Hart said, "That's why we're out here today." All the way through the rap, he praised the willingness of the rank and file to act in the absense of any effective leadership from the union.

Hart ended by talking about the demand for no reprisals. He said the rank and file had acted because of the failure of union leadership. He said that people who had acted in good faith were now in danger of getting fired. He said we couldn't expect the union to back us up on this. Any support for the no-reprisal demand would have to come from the group assembled there.

The first person to take the microphone after Hart was this middle-aged black guy. He's one of those who's physical presence communicates strength to everyone around him. Plus he was a powerful speaker. I was alarmed by what he said, though. He said, "If we go back tomorrow, we will have been defeated. We'll crawl back into the plant. And a lot of good people will get fired." He went on to talk about holding out until we had a guarantee of no reprisals.

A lot of people clapped when he said that. I was upset, though. I hadn't considered the walkout as something that could be won or lost. Rather, it was what it was. Most fundamentally, it was part of the day-to-day workers

struggle that went on before, during and after the walkout itself. I was more interested in discussing the ways in which the walkout had affected *that* struggle. Besides, it wasn't clear to me that we had the strength to hold the plant out anyway. I was worried because that question hadn't even been posed during the meeting.

This black guy was looking at the walkout in a different way, though. And it made me upset, because he seemed to set the tone for the ensuing discussion even more completely than Hart had. We were having a moralistic, not a political discussion of our situation.

About ten or fifteen people spoke after he did. A couple people talked about how they had walked out because there was too much work on their job, and since that issue hadn't been resolved they had no intention of going back. A bunch of people talked about how the union had fucked up. I remember this one black woman in particular. She said she had been insulted when Coleman had been out there talking through a bullhorn. She said she had walked out "to save his ass in the first goddamn place." Then she continued, "And I can't understand why we have to meet in a damn parking lot. We paid for that union hall over there. And now we can't even use it." She almost had tears in her eyes as she said this. A couple people talked about the defeat of the walkout itself. They said things had looked real good on Thursday night, and they didn't want to go back into the plant feeling scared or defeated. People would generally applaud as a speaker finished. Then there would be a long pause until someone took up the microphone.

Another communist guy got up to speak at this point. He was the one who talked about "the capitalist class" all the time. He talked about how we needed a strike committee and that we should go around trying to get other factories to strike in support of us. Then John Anderson spoke. He's an old-time labor radical who's been involved in Fleetwood politics for decades. He gave a rousing, soap-box type rap. The main thing he said was that, since he had been through those strikes before, he saw "no reason in the world anybody has to get fired for this walkout."

By this time, I was getting pretty upset. I wasn't happy with the way the meeting was going, but I felt powerless to intervene. The first thing I wanted to say was that I didn't think the meeting would have much of an effect on what would happen the next day. People were basically going to do what they wanted to do. And based on the discussions within my work group, I felt like people were going back. And I wanted to say this wouldn't necessarily mean defeat.

I was unable to get up and speak, though. Partly this happened because I knew I wasn't much of a public speaker. Also, I was confused. It's taken me a long time to sort out some of these issues. It seemed like somebody would get fired. I was hoping it wouldn't be me. But I had no idea how to prevent it. Also, I didn't talk because I knew my comments wouldn't be appreciated in that meeting. My comments would have been perceived as negative, as conservative. There would have been a dozen people shouting at me: "How can you think of going back when we all might get fired."

The heart of the problem here was the demand for no reprisals. The company would obviously come down hard on somebody. But they couldn't fire all of us. There were too many people involved for that. We would have been able to attract wide support for our cause.

So the company would only fire a couple of us. They'd get the "ringleaders," the "troublemakers." They'd use the occasion to nail some

of the people they wanted to get anyway. I myself was worried because I had already been fired from Fleetwood and I've never had a good attendance record.

But of all the people in the plant, Hart, Saunders and some of their friends were the ones the company had been trying to get most consistently. And they were playing key leadership roles in the strike. A lot of people were worried about reprisals. But it was clear in everybody's mind that the leftists had more to worry about than anybody else.

It's important to be clear here about the kind of leadership the leftists actually had to offer during the strike. Partly they came forward in a vacuum. The leadership of the union really had broken down, and most workers were unprepared for the specific organizational tasks which the walkout placed before us. Partly they came forward because they had technical skills which were vital at that moment. They could get up at a meeting and talk. They had access to loudspeakers. They could run off leaflets.

But it's important to recognize also that they came forward because they wanted to. They're *radical* people. They want *radical* changes to occur in society, and they're willing to take *radical* chances to make those changes come about.

That one communist guy seemed obsessed with this idea of "the capitalist class," and he apparently thought the walkout was an occasion to launch a full scale civil war. Hart, Saunders and the others, obviously more rational, wanted to see emerge a much stronger rank and file movement to reform the union. They said it over and over agan. They saw themselves as honorable rank and filers acting in response to the collapse of union leadership.

But they weren't *just* rank and filers. They were leftists as well. This is an essential distinction to make here. That's how their actions were perceived by everyone in the strike. And that's the only way to explain the widening gap between themselves and the rest of the workers.

As leftists, Hart, Saunders, and the rest were totally committed to this idea of reforming the union. They have a whole theory on how the radical transformation of society will be based on these union reform movements. The wildcat was an event which clearly brought to light the bankruptcy of the union. And it clearly demanded leadership from somewhere else. And because of this, Hart and Saunders saw it as an opportunity to commit *all* their resources to push the rank and file into a more offensive posture vis-a-vis both the union and the company.

I'm sure most workers would like to see such reform come about. And as the walkout itself demonstrated, people are willing to take risks to see that the union will at least survive. But at that moment, people weren't willing to commit *everything* to force the union to change. This is the essense of the difference between the leftists and most of the workers in the walkout.

I think the workers acted that way basically because it wasn't clear how the reform movement would at that moment draw on power that's already been established on the shop floor. Right now, the ability of the working class to win a wage at the workplace is one of the few things that protects people from outright starvation in this country. And people are engaged in a daily battle to win that wage with the least amount of suffering possible. People aren't prepared to move too far off that base of power. And they're not prepared to take chances which will fuck that base of power up. By walking out, we had extended our power as far as we could go at that point. (I don't mean to imply that the working class lacks other bases of power. I'm just talking about the

subjective implications of power in one specific circumstance.)

This also explains the inability of a lot of people (including myself) to express themselves during the walkout. Political clarity does not exist in a vacuum. It's related to power. On the shop floor, where people feel quite strong, they express themselves quite clearly. Away from the shop floor and that base of power, people become confused because the issues are less clear.

There's another reason people weren't prepared to commit everything at that point. I think people were anticipating that the base of power on the shop floor would be relatively intact after the walkout, even though the union would still be weak and even though there would be reprisals. We just didn't have our backs to the wall at that point.

Another factor in the gap between the workers and the leftists was that the leftists were too eager to substitute their own initiative for real rank and file initiative. A lot of times, the workers sentiments were ambiguous. The issues were complex. People were caught in the rush of events. The walkout gave people the opportunity for self-expression in some ways. But in other ways, the opportunity just wasn't there.

The leftists were relatively clear about what they wanted to do. And in situations where the workers weren't sure or had stopped moving forward all together, the leftists went ahead and did what they thought was best. Some of what they did had the direct support and participation of a lot of workers. Some of what they did had support but no direct participation.

But in the end, when the leftists had to hold out for no reprisals, they were basically caught in that position alone. They had to hold out. They were the ones in most danger. It was their last opportunity to rally support for their decision to take on the union once and for all.

It's ironic in a way, but you could say that "communism," as it was understood in that particular situation, became the last issue in the strike. People weren't thinking of communism as "a system of social relations in which exploitation has been eliminated." And for younger workers, who grew up with Vietnam and Watergate instead of McCarthyism, communism wasn't understood in terms of Russia. More and more now, American workers understand communism in terms of who communists *are* and by what communists *do*. What happened at Fleetwood is a classic example. Communists are committed to trade unions; they have technical skills; and they take extreme risks. Communists obviously have some support in the American working class today. But people are by no means prepared to risk *everything* to back them up.

Again, these are not things I understood completely at the time of the walkout. But I was disturbed at that meeting on Sunday. I knew it, and I wanted to know why. It's taken me a long time to come up with some answers.

After a while, Hart put the question to vote: "Do we want to go back tomorrow?" "No." "Will we be back at the gate to try and hold people out?" "Yes." The vote was unanimous. People shouted and raised their hands in support. The crowd had attached some emotion to the vote, and for a moment I was carried away by it.

I was bummed out, though. I knew at that moment that work would resume at Fleetwood the next day. And I knew the leftists had themselves hopelessly cut off. But mostly I was mad at myself for my inability to speak. What I wanted to say needed to be said. But by then it was too late.

IX. RETURN TO WORK

I didn't go down to the gate on Monday morning. I found out later what happened. The union really put on a show of force. They had all the local people out there, plus people from the Regional and International offices. Curtis McGuire, the Regional Director, was out there in person. They all had big coats on (in the summertime). They were using the coats to conceal weapons — chains, clubs and so on. But occasionally they'd expose some of the weapons to let people know just how far they were prepared to go. The police weren't around. One guy was quoted as saying, "Anyone who stays around here will get hurt real bad."

On the other hand, there were only about twenty-five people trying to hold the plant out. It was basically the leftists and their staunchest supporters. Their wider base among the workers had collapsed entirely. The day before, two hundred people had agreed to be at the gate, and the leftists must have felt they were on firm ground. But then only twenty-five people showed up. It was a disaster.

I got to the plant early that afternoon. I knew we were going back. But there was still some uncertainty in the air. I went to the bar and drank some to calm myself down. I waited until the last possible moment, gulped down a final drink, and then headed in.

When I got into my area, everybody else had returned that day as well, and they were getting ready to start up work as always. The attendance was actually pretty good that day. Pretty soon people were bickering about who would get a pass to get out early that day.

Things were so normal, in fact, that I got pretty demoralized. It was hot. The line was running just like always. It was almost like I had never left, and now I was doomed to stay forever. The line is something that destroys the memory of everything except itself. It forces you to stay glued to the "here and now." No matter how hard you work on a car, you have to jump ahead immediately to work on the next one. All the comraderie, all the spirit we had about each other during the walkout became part of the distant past almost as soon as the line began to move. Of course, there's a comraderie that's part of the shop floor struggle itself. But that's different. And it hadn't yet re-established itself after the walkout.

The other bummer was that our foreman Bruno immediately put us on notice for disciplinary action to be taken against us later. It really made us jittery: there would be reprisals after all. The worst part was that, at least in relation to the reprisals, we were in a completely passive position. All we could do was wait for the company and the union to decide what to do. Of course, the rumors started flying immediately, and after a few days I was sick of them. One minute you'd hear that we'd all been fired. The next minute you'd hear that nobody would get it. Then you'd hear of a big meeting at the General Motors Building on West Grand Boulevard. Apparently our fate would be decided high up on the throne somewhere. My stomach would twist and turn with each one of these rumors.

People were growing more and more upset with what the union had done. They felt like the union had called the walkout and then sold it out. I remember this one guy who said, "I'll never walk out again as long as I work at Fleetwood. Fuck it. I don't feel like being used as a puppet by the union. I walked out thinking the whole fucking plant was coming out, too. When I got out on the street, I saw only a couple of people, and I said, 'Fuck me. I let the union sell me a lot of bullshit and now I might lose my job.' I just got in my car and went

home." The union definitely lost a lot of credibility because of the walkout. Before it happened, the union could at least *call* for something like a walkout. Now they couldn't even do that.

One thing bothered me about the way people were talking, though. All the way through the walkout, we had referred to each other as *we,* and we had a clear idea about what *we* were accomplishing. "*We* shut the plant down." "*We* didn't turn back." But now people weren't using the word *we* any more. They talked about the union being fucked up and about the company getting ready to unload on us. But in relation to the walkout at least, we weren't the subjects any more. We were the objects. Of course, people hadn't lost their subjectivity in relation to the shop floor struggle. But I was still disappointed: that subjective sense of *we* had been one of the most important aspects of the walkout for me. Without it, that whole walkout was being seen more and more as a mistake.

After a while, the reprisals finally came, and they were devastating. Ten people were fired. Fifty-five people were given time off. And the rest, perhaps four or five hundred, were given a week off on paper. It was a package deal worked out between the International Union and some higher ups in the company. Technically, that's a violation of the contract, since the International is not supposed to take over Local affairs like that. Of course, the Local could have refused the settlement that the International came up with. But the Local was in disarray by then. There's been some talk since then that the Shop Chairman, Gabbard, actually forwarded to the company and the International a list of people he thought should be fired.

Predictably, Hart and Saunders and a few of their closest friends were on the list. The rest of the people fired were from opposite ends of the plant and didn't even know each other. They weren't particularly outspoken during the walkout itself, although they might have been before the strike took place. It may have been that the company and the union decided to fire a couple extra people just so it wouldn't look so blatantly political.

The reaction in the plant was outrage. Hart and the others may have been radicals, but they had a right to eat just like everybody else. And there was no way to escape the fact that the union called the walkout in the first place. John Anderson, the old time radical, said it best in a leaflet he distributed in the plant that week:

> *A case of rank and file union members trying to defend their union had turned into a case of union officials attacking their own rank and file. It was a shameful sight, as shameful as any I have seen in my forty years in the UAW.*

Both Anderson and Hart, in a leaflet distributed a couple days later, urged everybody to attend the union meeting coming up that Sunday. It would be the first real test of the strength that the fired people had in the plant.

I felt torn about going to the meeting. There were obvious reasons for going. But at that moment, I needed all the personal space I could get for my own problems. I was working six days a week on the nightshift. And Jane was working five days a week on the dayshift. That meant we had only forty-five minutes together between the time she came home from work and the time I had to leave. We had only one full day together every other week. It turned out that full day fell on the same day as the meeting. And I wasn't about to give it up.

But besides that, I have an intense dislike for union meetings. I've only been to three in four years of working for General Motors. And I always resolve never to go again. And I'm not

the only one that feels that way: nearly everyone in the rank and file come away from those meetings feeling bitter. The meetings are a forum which is downright hostile to what workers have to say.

I think now, however, that I made a mistake in not going to the meeting. Personal sacrifices are necessary at times. And the main point, which I didn't see at the time, is that when people are fired up in a situation like that, getting them back to work is more important than anything else. And the meeting was, in fact, an opportunity for the workers to express their outrage. Over 300 people were at the meeting, and others had to be turned away at the door. Time after time, people got up to denounce President Coleman and to demand that everybody be rehired. Coleman was really on the defensive. He finally admitted in public that the union had called the walkout: "When the union guys tell you to walk out, they're wrong, and nobody should suffer for it. I'm not in accordance with any of the penalties you all received." The meeting passed the following resolution:

> *The membership of Local 15, as the highest governing body of the Local, instructs the Shop Committee to inform Fleetwood management that no proposed Local Agreement will be accepted that does not include: reinstatement of all those charged and removal of all penalties resulting from the strike of August 26, 27, with full back pay.*

When Hart and the others reported the results of the meeting back in the plant through a leaflet, they were euphoric: "Local 15 was finally united for one cause: to gain back respect for our union by showing Fleetwood that we would support each other all the way." And, "The Local 15 membership can be proud of the unity we showed on Sunday."

But by then, nearly a month had passed since the walkout, and it was becoming a less and less visible issue on the shop floor. People would read the leaflets, comment occasionally, and so on. But essentially it was a drama taking place in the distance — over at the union hall. People didn't perceive a direct personal stake in it. They would refer to the walkout itself only rarely, and then only in passing. After a while, we heard that Hart and some of the other people had received letters from the International saying that all the penalties were settled and that no one would be rehired. These letters seemed to settle the issue in the minds of most people. This one guy, Jim, turned to me and said, "Well I guess that's it for them people, huh."

The fired people hadn't given up, though. They launched a petition campaign. Over a thousand people at Fleetwood and people at other plants signed a petition to support them. They came to each union meeting to state their case, and for a while they attracted some support. But then attendance at the meetings began to slip back to pre-walkout levels. They put out leaflets for a while trying to relate their case to the deterioration of conditions on the shop floor. But as time went on, they became more and more isolated from the shop floor struggle, and eventually they had to abandon that approach altogether.

There was still an awareness inside the department of who walked out and who didn't. But the image was fading fast. As it turned out, the division wasn't as destructive as I had anticipated. This was true mainly because that division nearly duplicated another division within the department: the division between the people who make individual deals with the foremen and people who don't. People had long since become used to living with this split.

It's the fundamental division in the workforce: it goes far deeper than polarities around race, sex, age or anything else.

My biker friend Jerry didn't walk out. I would have guessed he would have. But he was jammed up by his divorce just then. And it turned out he and Bruno were great friends: Bruno is the only foreman Jerry's ever worked for, and Bruno lets him stay over four hours every night to work on stock. If Bruno ever cut off that overtime, Jerry couldn't feed his kids. So Jerry doesn't rock the boat. He doesn't take his job into the hole.

I know all this about Jerry. And I don't exactly approve. But still, I can't hate the guy for it. For a long time, we worked right across the line from each other. And we were either going to get along or we weren't. And so we avoided the painful topics and stuck to the cheerful ones. We discussed cars, football, boredom. Once we had this delightful two-day discussion about whether or not to marry someone after you've lived with them for a while. But in all the time we worked together, we never discussed the walkout once.

On Friday, September 17, I was finally taken down and given my penalty. There was actually some pressure involved in the interview. You could fuck up and say the wrong thing. And you were isolated. The *comraderie* of the walkout was a distant memory. Even the *comraderie* of the shop floor was temporarily cut off. You were along with two company people and a union guy.

"Why did you walk out?"

"I saw everybody else go."

"Who told you to walk out?"

"I never saw the guy before." I slipped here. I should have insisted that nobody told me anything. Bruno was quick to jump on my error.

"You mean he was a complete stranger."

"Yeah. He must have come from the body shop."

"Come on. You must know who the guy is. What did he look like. Was it him (pointing to the union guy)? Was it me?"

"Actually, he did look a little like you, Bruno. He had a tie on. He haa gray hair. He might have been Italian."

"OK, OK. What time did you walk out?"

"I can't remember. Some time around seven."

"Do you know what paragraph 117 of the National Agreement is?"

"No."

"You are hereby assessed the penalty of a one week suspension. This is a paper penalty only."

"Does that mean I get the time off?" Bruno reacted sharply to this.

"Do you want the time off?"

"No, no. I was just asking." But to myself I said, "Fuck. If I want the time I'll just take it."

"After we were done talking, the union guy and the two company guys scribbled madly for a while. They had to go through this routine five hundred times, and they were in a hurry. I refused to sign the penalty. Instead I signed a grievance protesting the penalty. They gave me a blue carbon copy of my penalty. And then it was over.

X. CONCLUSION

Well, the main point I wanted to make about the walkout is that it wasn't an isolated event. It's still going on in many ways: workers at Fleetwood tried that particular tactic last summer; tomorrow the tactic will be different. And the managers of Fleetwood are outraged by this: they're just waiting for the day when they can crush the workers once and for all.

For a while after we got back the struggle simmered along under the surface. People had to recover from the walkout, and the line had to

start running full before it made sense to take the job into the hole. But on Monday, September 27, the line did run full and the battle began in earnest. The people in the Kotan area were in the strongest position so they moved first.

On both shifts, over a hundred people cooperated in taking the job into the hole. At times, people were two thousand feet from their original work stations. The plant was in chaos. The company responded by throwing people out for "bad worksmanship." They would nail people for the slightest mistake, so the tensions ran pretty high. Dozens of people were fired or given time off, and to replace them the company brought in people from other departments who had done the job in the past. This continued for two weeks, but by Friday, October 8, they had fired so many people that they couldn't replace them all and still cover for normal Friday night absenteeism. they had to let one out of every six jobs go down the line without a vinyl top. the cost to repair these jobs would run in the tens of thousands of dollars. So on that night, the company gave in. The number of teams on the Kotan job went from 35 to 39. Everyone who was fired was brought back with full back pay. People were celebrating a victory. And Kotan was just one example: this victory was repeated on smaller scales all over the plant.

These were short term victories to be sure. Several months later, the company cut the Kotan teams back to 37, ostensibly because they were running more cars that didn't need vinyl tops. With the next model run they'll start the whole battle over again. And they're moving slowly but surely to do away with the Kotan job altogether: they're working on a machine that will install the vinyl tops automatically. On a larger scale, they're also moving to cut their dependence on the Fleetwood and Cadillac plants: they're setting up Cadillac assembly operations in Linden, New Jersey, and in Iran.

The local union, in the meantime, was still in disarray. The committeemen spent months assembling the grievances off the floor and processing them through the initial grievance procedures (1st step and 2nd step meetings). But before going any further with the grievances, the committeemen needed approval from the Regional and International union people. I was shocked when I learned this, but the Regional Director and the International Rep can, on the basis of their personal inspection of the plant, completely override the grievances of the workers and the efforts of the committeemen. That's exactly what happened at Fleetwood. On his first visit to the plant, Curtis McGuire, the Regional Director, said he found 80% of the workers on the 3rd and 4th floors "reading books and waiting for their jobs to come up." He said there was no problem there. On his second visit, McGuire left the plant after a few minutes and went out to a bar. He came back so drunk that the Shop Chairman and the Plant Manager asked him to leave the plant.

This wasn't just a personal fiasco for McGuire; it was the final outcome of several bitter, frustrating months of preliminary grievance proceedings. People had been working the overloaded jobs for months now. And now all their grievances were worthless. Things were so bad that the shop committee held a demonstration at Solidarity House to protest the whole thing.

While this was going on, the people who were fired were still trying to get their jobs back. They had an appeal hearing before the International Executive Board. They were supposed to get a reply within a few weeks; it's now about four months later and they still haven't heard anything. The brightest news they got was when

Hart and Saunders were elected as alternate delegates to the UAW Convention in LA. Their election was a big surprise to everybody (including themselves), but it was a definite indication that they had some support left inside the plant. It was also an expression of the general discontent people were feeling.

In terms of actually getting rehired, though, it's not clear what they accomplished. They got a lot of support from other delegates at the convention. But they were never able to get the case raised on the floor. When a guy from Fleetwood wanted to raise it, the International arranged to not call on anybody from the entire Regional delegation. And when somebody from another region raised it in the context of a debate on human rights, his microphone was shut off and he was ruled out of order.

Back at Fleetwood, in the meantime, things had deteriorated even further. The plant has always had the worst attendance in the Fisher Body Division. To that distinction it now added having the lowest quality audit of any General Motors assembly plant in North America. The shit hit the fan, of course. Cadillac started turning away the bodies we shipped them. And the management people began to flip out: every day the foreman had to go to a meeting after work and explain in front of all the big bosses *every* mistake on *every* bad job that they ran. It was total humiliation. At one point the superintendent started kicking the walls and threatening to fire every foreman in Fleetwood.

For the workers, though, this was all pretty academic. For months the foremen didn't mention quality: they just wanted the jobs done well enough to keep their ass out of trouble. They spent most of their time enforcing the higher work load on people. Now all of a sudden they wanted quality. The workers reaction was simple: hire some more people and you'll get quality. But you can't have your cake and eat it, too.

By now it was the end of May, and the International was just getting around to authorizing a local strike which the Local had first requested back in February. But the strike deadline wasn't until the end of June, which meant the strike would take place just one month before the end of the model run. This was after people had worked the overloaded jobs for almost a year and just before the company would change all the jobs again anyway.

The workers had voted the previous fall to support a local strike. And that support held firm through the winter and the spring. But striking at the end of the model run was clearly a little different. People were saying, "Why strike now? Let's wait about six weeks and then go out. Hit 'em at the beginning of the model run, right when it hurts."

The International, which obviously planned this out in advance, used this ambivalent worker reaction to crush the Local even further. They demanded that the Local take another strike vote. The local people were furious. A new vote was illegal anyway. And the International was the one jamming up the grievance procedure from the beginning. A strike would probably be approved in a new vote. But if it wasn't, it would be a vote of total no-confidence in the Local. When the Local refused to hold the vote, the International said, "OK, Fuck you guys." And they pulled the strike letter authorizing the strike. That meant no local strike and no contract the entire length of the model run. The shop committee is now badly divided: they're putting out leaflets blaming each other for the disaster. And it's hard to tell if the grievance procedure will mean anything at all as we go into the new model run.

"Labor relations" have been chaotic at Fleetwood for the entire model run. They've continued to grind out the Cadillacs, but not

because of any internal control the company has on the workers. The control is more external: the economic hardship would be too great if the workers did what their every instinct tells them to do: leave that place behind forever.

All this raises a lot of questions for me, a lot of which I can't answer right now.

One primary question is: why is the company being so vicious in its effort to speed the place up? It's hard to imagne if you've never been through it. But if you have 10 seconds left after a job, they want those 10 seconds. If you have 2 seconds left, they want those 2 seconds. And to get those 2 seconds, they're willing to fuck with you, scream at you, throw you on the street: they take whatever means necessary. The thing I can't understand is why do they need the money *that bad?* Everybody knows that they're "greedy capitalists." But isn't there a deeper explanation than just greed?

One thing I can't figure out is just how healthy is the industry? It seems like GM and Ford are doing great and that Chrysler and AMC are finished. But even at Ford and GM, their rate of return on investment is going down, even though their total profits are way up. But does that account for what they do in the plants? Another thing is that they've cut their workforce dramatically in the last few years, and they're building almost as many cars now as they did with the big workforce. Is that the answer? Does somebody sit down with a calculator and figure X workers eliminated + Y speedup = Z dollars of extra profit? I wish I knew more about how these decisions are made. Another thing I wonder about is "the crisis of capitalism." Even the leaders of the system itself admit that something's going wrong. Is what we're seeing at Fleetwood just the local side of a crisis that's international in scope?

Another thing I wonder about is the future of the union. Maybe I'm basing everything on Fleetwood, and maybe that's not a good example. But what I see at Fleetwood is the collapse of the union. I don't mean we're moving toward decertification votes or anything. But right now the union is deteriorating to the status of some social service agency: it will preside over the dispensation of fringe benefits. But it will be of no use at all in the workers' struggle on the shop floor. A lot of people see that happening at Fleetwood. Almost daily I hear somebody say, "The union used to be good back in '68 and '69. But now it ain't worth a fuck."

For the company, the problems are obvious. Even a minimally functioning grievance procedure presents a real threat to their efforts to speed the place up. And there are too many extra-legal forms of struggle (such as sabotage, taking the job in the hole, absenteeism and so on) which the grievance procedure can't control anyway. And the fringe benefits agreed to years ago are now costing more than anybody ever imagined. GM now spends more money per car on health care than on steel; it's single largest supplier is Blue Cross; the second largest is Aetna Life and Casualty Co; the third largest is U.S. Steel. The company response to all this is two-fold: cut as many workers as possible to reduce total labor costs, and force the union into a more and more repressive posture vis-a-vis the workers who are left.

The big weakness of the union is that it's divided structurally so that the International has no commitment to supporting the shop floor struggle: it's committed only to delivering wages and benefits through the national contracts. The local people at Fleetwood are by no means radical. They would like nothing better than to establish a certain presence on the shop floor and then enjoy a career based on that. But they can't even accomplish that any more.

Their careers are getting destroyed by the International. I'm absolutely amazed by what the International is doing at Fleetwood. They're not even supporting one faction over the other within the Local. They're destroying the entire Local union apparatus. Sometimes it seems almost self-destructive: how long can the superstructure last after the base has been swept away?

It's ironic in a way, but the fate of these local people is very similar to the fate of Hart and Saunders. Both groups tried to launch their careers in the plant from the same platform: militant pursuit of local grievancers. But when the grievance procedures collapse, as at Fleetwood, there is nothing left to pursue. By trying to direct the militancy of the walkout back into the union, Hart and Saunders got themselves isolated. The workers were already moving in a different direction. The walkout was a recognition that the union was collapsing, and it was an initial attempt to check out some new ways of fighting back.

The next time people think of walking out at Fleetwood, I'm going to try to persuade them not to. It's not a good tactic. People are too vulnerable. It's hard to force the company to bargain with you once you've left the plant. They can basically wait for you to come back in.

The problem, then, is to pressure the company from inside the plant. The working class can exert its power by not producing. It can also exert its power by seizing essential components of the capitalist productive apparatus.

But in saying I wouldn't walk out again, I don't want to imply that the walkout was a mistake or a defeat. I don't think it was either of these, and I don't think these terms are very useful in evaluating what happened. The walkout was part of a process: a necessary part of a necessary process. It was basically a new generation of worker that walked out. We had to try it once to see what it was like. And Hart and Saunders represent a new generation of leftists. It's a tribute to everybody concerned to suggest that we act differently next time around.

John Lippert strongly invites comments, criticisms and contacts based on his articles. Please write to him at P.O. Box 1015A, Detroit, MI 48232. *He would like to thank Staughton Lynd for helping on this article.*

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